

“Foreign information manipulation and interference as a trust-impairment mechanism in the age of artificial intelligence”

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FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE AS A TRUST-IMPAIRMENT MECHANISM IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Abstract

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) increasingly operates in an information environment shaped by artificial intelligence, cross-platform circulation, and long-term narrative exposure. This paper develops an audience-centered relational framework for conceptualizing how AI-enabled FIMI may impair institutional trust in democratic societies. Rather than treating FIMI primarily as a problem of false content or message diffusion, the study examines how manipulative narratives may work through five interconnected dimensions: audience segmentation and targeting, narrative positioning, involvement and persuasion pathways, touchpoint configuration and information journey, and relationship degradation and trust impairment. Methodologically, this is a conceptual and theoretical study. It uses publicly available official reports, policy documents, public analyses, media reports, and think-tank publications concerning defense-related information narratives in Taiwan from 2022 to the first half of 2026 as illustrative materials, rather than as a systematically collected empirical dataset. The Taiwan case is therefore used as a theory-guided illustrative application, not as an empirical test of causal effects. The framework illustrates three possible trust-impairment pathways: weakening confidence in government competence, eroding credibility in democratic institutions, and reducing public identification with collective resilience. The study contributes to FIMI research by shifting attention from isolated messages to cumulative relational processes through which AI-enabled narrative environments may contribute to the gradual weakening of democratic trust.

Keywords

FIMI, trust, artificial intelligence, cognition, audiences,
narratives, platforms, Taiwan

JEL Classification

D83, F52, O33, M31

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the globalized information environment has become a critical arena of geopolitical competition. Inter-state competition is no longer confined to military, economic, and diplomatic domains; it has increasingly extended into struggles over social cognition, public communication spaces, and institutional trust (Deppe & Schaal, 2024; T.-C. Hung & T.-W. Hung, 2022; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Against this backdrop, democratic states face information threats that are more organized, cross-border, and strategically oriented than conventional misinformation or disinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) refers to coordinated and intentional attempts by foreign actors to manipulate information environments in ways that may affect political judgment, social perception, and democratic governance (EEAS, 2025).

FIMI overlaps with, but is not identical to, related concepts such as disinformation, propaganda, cognitive warfare, and influence operations. Disinformation usually refers to false or misleading information circulated with the intent to deceive (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), while propaganda emphasizes persuasive communication in the service of political objectives. Cognitive warfare focuses more directly on shaping perception, decision-making, and psychological vulnerability (NATO, 2025), whereas influence operations refer to broader, organized efforts to affect attitudes or behavior (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). In this paper, FIMI is used as a broader analytical concept that highlights foreign actor involvement, cross-border coordination, manipulation of the information environment, strategic goal orientation, and the cumulative effects of repeated exposure across platforms and audiences (EEAS, 2025).

This development is significant because the strategic effect of FIMI is not limited to whether a particular audience believes a single false claim. In democratic societies, political trust is closely related to citizens' expectations of institutional competence, integrity, responsiveness, and legitimacy. It also shapes policy acceptance, public compliance, institutional support, and democratic resilience (Levi & Stoker, 2000). In this paper, institutional trust impairment refers to a gradual weakening of citizens' confidence in public institutions, including perceived incompetence, erosion of legitimacy, loss of credibility, reduced willingness to comply with public policy, and weakened identification with democratic governance. When information manipulation repeatedly frames public institutions as incompetent, unfair, opaque, or untrustworthy, its effects may therefore extend beyond the correction of individual falsehoods. It may gradually affect how citizens evaluate governmental capacity, institutional credibility, and their own relationship with democratic governance.

Existing research has produced important insights into the content and circulation of false or misleading information. Studies on misinformation and disinformation have examined truth-status classifications, diffusion speed, and patterns of circulation on digital platforms, especially social media (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). These studies remain essential for understanding how messages are produced, circulated, and amplified. However, AI-enabled FIMI also requires attention to audience differentiation, repeated exposure, cognitive processing, emotional resonance, and the cumulative transformation of trust relationships. This problem becomes more pressing in the age of artificial intelligence, as generative AI lowers the cost of producing narrative variants, while recommendation systems and platform analytics may enable more adaptive forms of exposure, targeting, and feedback-based adjustment (Bakir, 2020; Goldstein et al., 2023; Pathak et al., 2023).

The central question is, therefore, how AI-enabled FIMI may be conceptualized as a long-term, audience-centered, and relational process through which institutional trust is gradually impaired. To answer this question, we develop an audience-centered relational framework composed of five dimensions: audience segmentation and targeting, narrative positioning, involvement and persuasion pathways, touchpoint configuration and information journey, and relationship degradation and trust impairment. These concepts are selectively adapted as analytical tools for examining audience differentiation, narrative exposure, and trust relationships; they are not transferred as commercial assumptions, nor do we equate FIMI with marketing practice. The framework is developed through conceptual synthesis and illustrated using publicly documented narratives of defense-related information in Taiwan. The Taiwan case is used not as an empirical test of causal effects, but as a theory-guided illustrative application that demonstrates how the proposed framework may be applied to a frontline democratic context.

This study contributes to FIMI research in three ways. First, it shifts analytical attention from isolated messages to cumulative relational processes. Second, it clarifies institutional trust impairment as a key conceptual focus for analyzing long-term information manipulation. Third, it explains how AI may function not only as a tool of content production but also as a cross-cutting optimization mechanism that may strengthen the precision, persistence, and adaptability of FIMI across audiences, platforms, and time.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study reviews four bodies of literature that inform the proposed audience-centered relational framework: content-oriented studies of misinformation and disinformation, diffusion-oriented research on digital platforms, cognitive and persuasion theories of audience processing, and selected marketing concepts adapted for relational analysis. Rather than repeating the definitional debate on foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), the review identifies how these literatures explain different parts of the influence process and why an integrated framework is needed to connect information content, audience differentiation, repeated exposure, and institutional trust impairment.

A first strand of the literature focuses on information content. Studies in this tradition examine the semantic features, emotional appeals, narrative structures, and truth-status classifications of false or misleading information. The distinction among misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation has provided an important foundation for analyzing different types of information disorder and their relationship to intent, content, and harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This content-oriented approach is useful for fact-checking, platform moderation, and media literacy education because it clarifies what kinds of claims circulate in the public sphere and how they may mislead audiences. Its limitation, however, is that a focus on discrete messages or single narratives may not fully explain how repeated exposure, emotional accumulation, and everyday reproduction generate longer-term effects.

A second strand of research emphasizes the diffusion of misinformation and disinformation across digital platforms. This literature has shown that false information may spread rapidly and widely through social networks, platform architectures, and algorithmic amplification (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). It also highlights the importance of network structures, platform governance, and information ecosystems in shaping the circulation of political content. Diffusion-oriented studies are therefore essential for understanding how messages travel. Yet they provide a more limited account of how different audiences interpret

the same information under varying cognitive, emotional, and social conditions, or how repeated information contact is translated into changing evaluations of institutions.

A third body of literature, drawn from cognitive psychology and persuasion theory, helps explain why audience responses differ. The Elaboration Likelihood Model suggests that individuals process information through either central or peripheral routes depending on their level of involvement and cognitive motivation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Under high-involvement conditions, audiences are more likely to evaluate evidence, compare arguments, and engage in systematic reasoning. Under low-involvement conditions, however, they may rely on emotional signals, source familiarity, group identity, visual cues, or other peripheral indicators. The Heuristic-Systematic Model similarly shows that individuals use both systematic processing and heuristic judgment when evaluating information (Chaiken et al., 1989). In environments characterized by information overload, limited time, and scarce attention, heuristic processing may become a dominant mode of everyday judgment.

These cognitive mechanisms are important for FIMI because political and security-related information is often encountered through short videos, memes, emotionally charged headlines, fragmented personal stories, and simplified narratives rather than complete policy analysis (Bakir, 2020; Brady et al., 2017; EEAS, 2025). Research on misinformation belief and the illusory truth effect further suggests that repeated exposure can increase the perceived truthfulness of a claim, even when the claim is false or uncertain (Ecker et al., 2022). This suggests that foreign actors do not necessarily need to persuade audiences through a single strong argument. Low-intensity, repeated, and emotionally resonant contact may gradually reshape perceptions of institutional capacity, policy legitimacy, and social trust.

The concept of institutional trust impairment is central to this study. Institutional trust broadly refers to citizens' confidence that public institutions are trustworthy, competent, legitimate, fair, and capable of acting in the public interest (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Here, we treat impairment as a

gradual weakening of the relational bond between citizens and institutions rather than as the complete collapse of trust. This perspective is important for FIMI research because informational influence may affect democratic governance not only by making audiences believe false claims, but also by repeatedly reshaping how they perceive institutional competence, credibility, legitimacy, and collective identification. Institutional trust impairment is therefore understood here as a cumulative relational process through which repeated informational interaction may damage the foundations of democratic governance.

Marketing theory offers a useful but limited conceptual bridge for analyzing this shift from message persuasion to relational influence. This paper does not equate FIMI with commercial marketing, nor does it suggest that information manipulation and market-oriented communication are ethically, politically, or institutionally equivalent. The logic of transfer is methodological and analogical rather than substantive. Certain marketing concepts are transferable because they describe general processes of audience differentiation, message positioning, repeated contact, and relationship formation. However, commercial objectives such as profit maximization, voluntary consumer exchange, customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and market competition cannot be directly transferred into the security context. In FIMI, audiences are not “customers,” public institutions are not “brands” in a commercial sense, and the purpose of influence is not market exchange but the manipulation of political perception, institutional credibility, and social trust.

With this limitation in mind, several marketing concepts can be adapted for security analysis. Segmentation, targeting, and positioning are useful for explaining how different audience groups may be approached through differentiated narratives and emotional appeals according to age, identity, political attitudes, media habits, policy involvement, or preexisting grievances (Aagaard & Marthedal, 2023; Bakir, 2020; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Matz et al., 2017). In the FIMI context, segmentation does not mean identifying consumer markets, but identifying socially and cognitively differentiated publics. Targeting does not mean advertising to potential customers, but direct-

ing narrative exposure toward specific audience vulnerabilities or concerns. Positioning does not mean creating brand preference, but framing institutions, policies, or identities in ways that resonate with existing anxieties, grievances, or value judgments.

Customer journey and relationship marketing theories can also be adapted, but only after conceptual modification. Customer journey theory argues that judgment and attachment are not formed through a single contact point, but through repeated interactions across different times, platforms, and contexts (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Applied to FIMI, this becomes an “information journey” rather than a customer journey. Audiences do not encounter a complete narrative in one instance; instead, they repeatedly encounter fragmented, emotional, or symbolic narrative elements in everyday information flows. Relationship marketing similarly emphasizes that relationships are built through sustained interaction, emotional connection, and accumulated trust (Fournier, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In a political and security context, this insight can be adapted to examine how trust relationships between citizens and institutions may be strengthened, weakened, or reconfigured over time. The concept of relationship degradation is therefore used here not to describe the loss of customer loyalty, but to analyze the gradual weakening of perceived institutional competence, credibility, legitimacy, and identification.

The rise of artificial intelligence adds a further layer to this relational process. Generative AI reduces the cost of producing texts, images, videos, and audiovisual content in different tones, styles, and formats (Goldstein et al., 2023). Recommendation systems and platform algorithms can personalize information exposure based on user behavior and interaction data (Pathak et al., 2023). These developments shift information manipulation from broad broadcast-style communication toward more segmented, adaptive, and feedback-driven influence. AI also allows narratives to be tested and optimized through user interaction data, following a logic similar to A/B testing and performance optimization in digital environments (Kohavi et al., 2020). Therefore, the significance of AI does not

lie only in automated content generation or deep-fakes. It also lies in its ability to reshape the operational logic of FIMI by making influence more precise, persistent, and adaptable.

Taken together, the literature reveals three theoretical gaps. First, existing research still lacks an integrated framework that connects information content, audience differentiation, cognitive processing, repeated exposure, and institutional trust. Second, although FIMI is increasingly understood as a strategic and cross-border activity, its nature as a long-term relational process remains underdeveloped. Third, although recent studies recognize the impact of AI on information manipulation, AI is often treated mainly as a tool for content production or automation rather than as a mechanism that reorganizes the structure of influence operations. These gaps indicate the need for an audience-centered relational framework that explains how FIMI may operate across audiences, platforms, and time as a mechanism of institutional trust impairment.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a conceptual research design (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Its purpose is to develop an audience-centered relational framework for explaining how foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) may operate across audiences, platforms, and time as a mechanism of institutional trust impairment in the age of artificial intelligence. As a conceptual and theory-building study, we do not conduct statistical calculations, hypothesis testing, interviews, surveys, experiments, or original social media data collection. Instead, we use conceptual synthesis and a theory-guided illustrative application to construct and illustrate the proposed framework. The objective is not to validate the framework empirically, but to specify its conceptual logic and illustrate how it can be applied to publicly documented defense-related information narratives.

The research procedure consists of four steps. First, the study reviews and synthesizes four bodies of literature: FIMI and information manipulation studies, marketing theory, cognitive psychology, and information security research. This step iden-

tifies concepts that explain how information influence may move from message exposure to audience response and longer-term changes in institutional trust. Second, the study compares these concepts and extracts their common analytical logic, leading to five interrelated dimensions: audience segmentation and targeting, narrative positioning, involvement and persuasion pathways, touch-point configuration and information journey, and relationship degradation and trust impairment. Marketing concepts are not transferred wholesale into the security context; they are adapted as analytical analogies for examining audience identification, narrative positioning, repeated exposure, and citizens' perceived relationship with public institutions. Third, artificial intelligence is incorporated as a horizontal optimization mechanism that may affect all five dimensions through content generation, audience targeting, algorithmic exposure, and feedback-based adjustment. Fourth, the framework's analytical applicability is illustrated through the Taiwan case.

The illustrative case focuses on defense-related information narratives in Taiwan from 2022 to the first half of 2026. Taiwan is selected because its defense policy, military service system, civil defense preparedness, and armed forces' public image are situated at the intersection of domestic governance, cross-Strait security pressure, and Indo-Pacific geopolitical competition. This period includes intensified public debate over defense preparedness, military service reform, civil defense, alliance reliability, and cross-Strait crisis scenarios, and coincides with greater concern about cognitive warfare, FIMI, and AI-enabled information manipulation.

The documentary materials include four types of publicly available sources:

- official statements and policy documents on defense policy, military service reform, civil defense, all-out defense mobilization, cognitive security, and responses to information manipulation;
- research and policy materials by Taiwanese and international research institutes, think tanks, fact-checking organizations, and policy research bodies;

- selected media reports documenting public controversies or recurring narratives related to military service, military treatment, and voluntary service; and, where relevant,
- platform-circulated narratives cited, summarized, or discussed in official, research, fact-checking, or media sources.

Representative materials include government explanations concerning the restoration of one-year compulsory military service, Ministry of National Defense and Executive Yuan materials on all-out defense mobilization and civil defense preparedness, official communications on cognitive warfare and information manipulation, publicly available reports by Taiwanese and international research institutes and think tanks on Taiwan's information environment, and fact-checking or media reports documenting recurrent defense-related narratives. These materials were selected because they publicly document the policy context, contested narratives, or institutional responses relevant to defense-related trust. Media and platform-related materials were used only when the relevant narratives had been publicly cited, summarized, or discussed in official, research, fact-checking, or media sources, rather than collected as raw social media data.

Because Taiwan serves as an illustrative application rather than a systematic content analysis, this study does not construct an exhaustive corpus of narrative materials. Instead, it relies on publicly available documentary materials. These sources are used not as a statistical dataset, but as documentary materials for identifying recurring narrative themes and demonstrating the analytical usefulness of the proposed framework. Accordingly, the paper does not claim to measure the frequency, diffusion scale, audience reach, or causal effects of these narratives.

The case analysis examines three defense-related narratives: military service extension, military treatment and living conditions, and voluntary service or military career choices. These narrative types were identified through repeated reading and comparison of the public materials described above. They were selected because they are relevant to defense-related institutional trust, recur across

public or policy discussions, and illustrate the framework's analytical dimensions. Military service extension illustrates how high-involvement policy issues may be transformed into questions of defense trust and policy legitimacy. Military treatment and living conditions illustrate how low-involvement everyday content may generate cumulative institutional impressions through repeated exposure. Voluntary service and military career choices illustrate how military identity and institutional appeal may be reframed through social comparison and value judgment.

The purpose of the illustrative case is not to attribute specific narratives to a particular foreign actor, conduct a full causal test, or claim that all public criticism of Taiwan's defense policy constitutes FIMI. Rather, we examine how narratives associated with FIMI risks, as documented in official, research, fact-checking, or media sources, may exploit existing concerns, amplify selected grievances, and connect them to broader perceptions of institutional incompetence, declining credibility, or weakened collective resilience. This design is appropriate for a theory-building study because the objective is not to test a single causal hypothesis, but to develop an analytical framework for examining FIMI as an AI-enabled mechanism of institutional trust impairment within geopolitical competition.

3. RESULTS

The result of the conceptual synthesis is an audience-centered relational framework of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). Since this study is designed as a qualitative conceptual paper, the results do not take the form of statistical calculations or hypothesis testing. Instead, the results consist of the analytical systematization of FIMI into five dimensions and the identification of artificial intelligence as a horizontal optimization mechanism across these dimensions.

The five dimensions should be understood as a process-oriented analytical framework rather than as a strictly linear sequence or an empirically verified causal model. Analytically, the framework moves from audience segmentation and targeting to narrative positioning, involvement and persuasion

pathways, touchpoint configuration and information journey, and finally relationship degradation and trust impairment. Empirically, however, these dimensions may overlap, recur, and mutually reinforce one another. Audience reactions may feed back into renewed segmentation, narrative adjustment, and exposure optimization. The framework, therefore, treats the five dimensions both as interrelated components of a cumulative influence process and as analytical lenses for examining how FIMI operates across audiences, platforms, and time.

In this framework, influence operators may differentiate audiences according to their cognitive characteristics, emotional conditions, and information-use habits, drawing on the logic of audience segmentation and targeting (Bakir, 2020; Kotler & Keller, 2012), while platform environments may reinforce this differentiation through algorithmic exposure and behavioral feedback (Pathak et al., 2023). Narratives are then positioned in ways that resonate with audiences' preexisting concerns, grievances, or value frameworks (Bakir, 2020; T.-C. Hung & T.-W. Hung, 2022), and are encountered through different persuasion pathways and distributed across multiple touchpoints in everyday information environments (Brady et al., 2017;

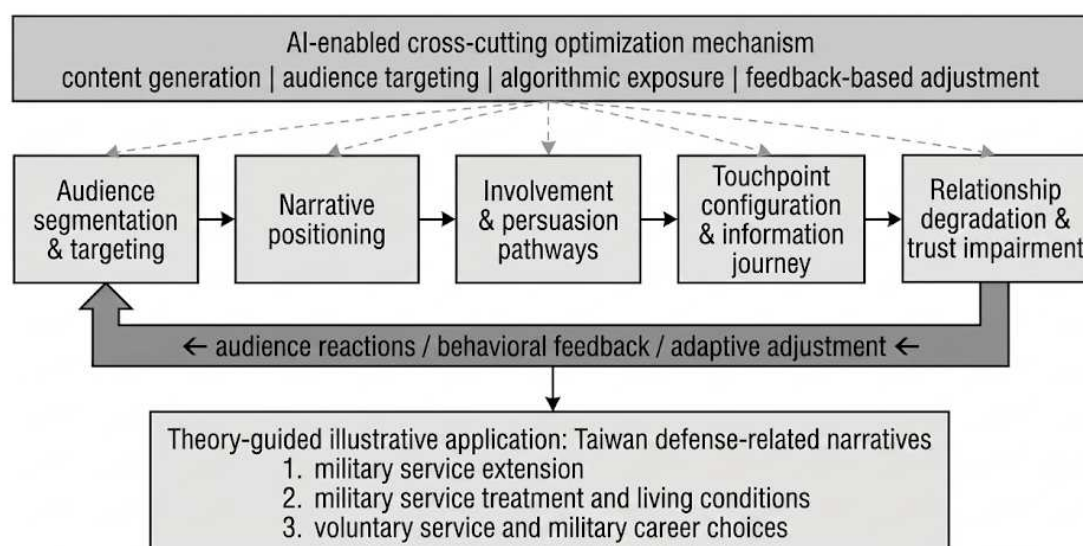
Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Over time, repeated exposure and interaction may gradually alter how audiences evaluate institutions, policies, or security organizations (Ecker et al., 2022; Levi & Stoker, 2000). The central concern is therefore not only whether a single message is believed, but how cumulative informational interaction may weaken institutional trust.

Artificial intelligence is incorporated into the framework as a horizontal optimization mechanism. It may support content generation, audience targeting, algorithmic exposure, and feedback-based adjustment across the five dimensions (Goldstein et al., 2023; Pathak et al., 2023; Sedova et al., 2021). In this sense, AI does not constitute a sixth dimension, but rather strengthens the precision, persistence, and adaptability of the overall influence process.

3.1. Audience segmentation and targeting

The first result is the identification of audience segmentation and targeting as the starting point



Note: The five dimensions are presented as a process-oriented framework, but they should not be read as fixed chronological stages or as an empirically tested causal model. Artificial intelligence is represented as a horizontal optimization mechanism across the framework through content generation, audience targeting, algorithmic exposure, and feedback-based adjustment. The feedback loop indicates that audience reactions and behavioral feedback may be used to refine segmentation, reposition narratives, and adjust exposure strategies over time.

Figure 1. An audience-centered relational framework of AI-Enabled FIMI and institutional trust impairment

of FIMI's relational influence process. Drawing on STP theory, this dimension shows that FIMI does not address audiences as a homogeneous public. Different groups vary in their values, media-use habits, levels of policy involvement, social identities, and modes of information processing (Kotler & Keller, 2012). In the context of FIMI, segmentation may be based on age, occupation, political orientation, social identity, media habits, policy involvement, or preexisting grievances (Bakir, 2020).

This result indicates that FIMI can operate through differentiated audience strategies. For highly involved audiences, operators may use more argumentative or policy-critical content. For low-involvement audiences, they may rely on emotional, visual, entertaining, or meme-based content to reduce cognitive burden and increase receptivity (Brady et al., 2017; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In digital environments, this process is further strengthened by behavioral data and algorithmic recommendations (Bakir, 2020; Pathak et al., 2023). Audience targeting, therefore, shifts from broad categorization toward more granular forms of micro-targeting, allowing external actors to operate around specific social cleavages or emotional vulnerabilities.

3.2. Narrative positioning

The second result is the identification of narrative positioning as the mechanism through which issues, institutions, and identities are made meaningful to different audiences. In the context of FIMI, positioning does not simply determine what is said; it determines how a target institution, policy, or social role is framed in relation to audiences' concerns, grievances, or emotional vulnerabilities.

This dimension shows that FIMI does not necessarily rely on complete arguments or explicit factual claims. It often operates through emotional cues, symbols, fragmented information, and pre-existing social grievances. Feelings of unfairness, deprivation, sacrifice, corruption, or distrust can be amplified through simplified narratives. The objective is not always to make audiences believe a complete proposition, but to shape their overall impressions of a target. Through repeated narrative framing, FIMI may gradually alter evalua-

tions of institutional capacity, policy legitimacy, and governance credibility (Bakir, 2020; Brady et al., 2017; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; EEAS, 2025; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

3.3. Involvement and persuasion pathways

The third result is the identification of involvement and persuasion pathways as the cognitive mechanism linking information exposure to audience response. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, audiences process information through different routes depending on their level of involvement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Under high-involvement conditions, audiences are more likely to engage in rational analysis and evaluate evidence. Under low-involvement conditions, they are more likely to rely on emotional responses, source familiarity, group identity, visual cues, or other peripheral signals (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken et al., 1989; Ecker et al., 2022).

This result explains why FIMI can operate without relying exclusively on long-form arguments or explicit persuasion. Much political and security-related information in digital environments is encountered through everyday browsing, social interaction, and fragmented attention. Images, short videos, memes, slogans, emotionally charged headlines, or fragmentary experiential accounts may generate impressions without deep reflection (Brady et al., 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Repeated exposure may further increase familiarity and shape perceptions of credibility and importance (Ecker et al., 2022). As a result, FIMI often operates through low-intensity, long-duration, and high-frequency influence rather than one-time persuasion (EEAS, 2025; T.-C. Hung & T.-W. Hung, 2022).

3.4. Touchpoint configuration and information journey

The fourth result is the identification of touchpoint configuration and information journey as the process through which FIMI accumulates over time. Touchpoint configuration concerns how information is encountered, accumulated, and re-interpreted across platforms, times, and contexts. Customer journey theory suggests that judgment

is not determined by a single contact point, but by a continuous process composed of multiple touchpoints (Homburg et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In digital environments, these touchpoints may include social media, video platforms, search engines, messaging applications, forums, news websites, and algorithmically recommended content (Pathak et al., 2023).

Applied to FIMI, this process can be understood as an information journey. Audiences do not receive a complete and systematic message in a single encounter. Instead, they encounter fragmented information across different platforms and emotional contexts in everyday life (EEAS, 2025; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Although each fragment may appear limited or scattered, its long-term accumulation can generate broader impressions of specific issues, institutions, or organizations (Ecker et al., 2022; T.-C. Hung & T.-W. Hung, 2022). Algorithmic recommendation systems intensify this process by repeatedly pushing similar content into personalized information flows (Pathak et al., 2023). The information journey is, therefore, a dynamic field jointly shaped by platform mechanisms, audience behavior, and external influence strategies.

3.5. Relationship degradation and trust impairment

The fifth result is the identification of relationship degradation and trust impairment as the relational outcome of FIMI. This dimension requires conceptual clarification because relationship marketing is originally a positive concept. In commercial marketing, relationship building refers to the cultivation of long-term customer attachment, satisfaction, commitment, and trust (Fournier, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the FIMI context, however, this logic is not transferred as a normative or positive practice. Rather, it is analytically inverted. FIMI may imitate, exploit, or distort relational communication mechanisms in order to degrade trust between citizens and public institutions.

From this perspective, the relevance of relationship marketing lies not in its commercial objectives, but in its insight that relationships are shaped through repeated interaction, emotional association, accumulated experience, and perceived re-

liability (Fournier, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Translated into a political and security context, public trust in governments, military institutions, and democratic systems can be understood as a relational asset accumulated over time (Kalpokas, 2017; Levi & Stoker, 2000). FIMI may target this relational asset by repeatedly associating institutions with incompetence, unfairness, opacity, irresponsibility, or loss of legitimacy (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; EEAS, 2025).

Relationship degradation, therefore, refers to the gradual weakening of the perceived bond between audiences and institutions. It may appear as declining confidence in institutional competence, reduced credibility of official communication, erosion of policy legitimacy, lower willingness to comply with public policy, or weakened identification with collective resilience (Levi & Stoker, 2000). The key effect of FIMI is not only whether audiences accept a specific false claim, but whether long-term informational interaction changes the way they relate to public institutions. In this sense, trust impairment is the cumulative relational outcome of audience segmentation, narrative positioning, persuasion pathways, and repeated information journeys.

3.6. Artificial intelligence as a horizontal optimization mechanism

The final result is that artificial intelligence should not be treated as a separate dimension of FIMI, but as a horizontal optimization mechanism that cuts across the entire framework. AI may affect audience segmentation, narrative positioning, persuasion pathways, touchpoint configuration, and relationship degradation by increasing the precision, persistence, and adaptability of influence operations (Bakir, 2020; Feuerriegel et al., 2023; Goldstein et al., 2023).

To avoid treating AI-enabled FIMI as a single mechanism, this study distinguishes between two analytically distinct channels. The first is actor-directed AI use. Malicious or strategically motivated actors may use generative AI to produce large volumes of textual, visual, audio, or audiovisual content in different tones, styles, languages, and formats (Feuerriegel et al., 2023; Goldstein et

al., 2023; Helmus & Chandra, 2024; Sedova et al., 2021). They may also use data analytics, automated accounts, synthetic identities, or A/B testing-like procedures to identify responsive audiences, test narrative variants, and adjust emotional framing, timing, and distribution strategies (Bakir, 2020; Kohavi et al., 2020; Sedova et al., 2021). In this channel, AI is directly incorporated into the operational design of FIMI.

The second channel is ecosystem-mediated optimization. Not all AI-enabled amplification is intentionally designed by malicious actors. Recommendation systems and engagement-based feeds may increase exposure to content that generates clicks, comments, shares, viewing time, or other measurable forms of interaction (Pathak et al., 2023). These systems are not necessarily created for FIMI purposes. However, once manipulative narratives enter such environments, platform optimization mechanisms may increase their repetition, visibility, and audience-specific exposure.

Distinguishing these two channels is important. Actor-directed AI use concerns the intentional deployment of AI by influence operators, whereas ecosystem-mediated optimization concerns the broader platform and information environment in which exposure is algorithmically organized. The strategic significance of AI-enabled FIMI lies in the possible interaction between the two. Malicious actors may produce and adapt narratives, while platform systems may amplify content that performs well under engagement-based logics. As a result, FIMI may become more precise in audience targeting (Aagaard & Marthedal, 2023; Bakir, 2020), more persistent through repeated touchpoints (Ecker et al., 2022; EEAS, 2025), and more adaptable through continuous feedback (Kohavi et al., 2020; Sedova et al., 2021).

AI, therefore, strengthens the framework not by adding a sixth dimension, but by optimizing the operation of all five dimensions. It lowers the cost of narrative variation, enables more granular audience differentiation, increases the frequency of repeated exposure, and allows influence strategies to be revised in response to audience reactions. This is why AI should be understood as a horizontal mechanism that reorganizes the entire influence process rather than merely as a

tool for producing synthetic content or deepfakes (Feuerriegel et al., 2023; Goldstein et al., 2023; Sedova et al., 2021).

4. DISCUSSION

The Taiwan materials suggest how FIMI can be conceptualized not only as the circulation of false or misleading claims, but also as a possible long-term relational process in which audience segmentation, narrative positioning, persuasion pathways, touchpoint configuration, and trust impairment may interact over time. Compared with content-oriented approaches, the framework directs attention from isolated messages to the possible cumulative transformation of institutional perceptions. Compared with diffusion-oriented approaches, it emphasizes not only how information spreads, but also how repeated information contact may affect the trust relationship between audiences and institutions.

4.1. Defense trust in Taiwan as an illustrative frontline-democracy context

Taiwan serves as an illustrative context for interpreting the proposed framework, as it lies at the intersection of Indo-Pacific geopolitical competition, cross-Strait security tensions, and democratic information governance. Taiwan's defense policy, military service system, and the public image of its armed forces extend beyond domestic policy concerns. They also constitute potential arenas where external narrative interventions and cognitive influences may interact with domestic issues, social grievances, and public perceptions of institutional credibility.

To maintain consistency with our conceptual and illustrative orientation, the Taiwan discussion should be understood as an illustrative application rather than a systematic empirical case analysis. This paper does not aim to establish causal relationships or attribute specific narratives to any particular foreign actor. Instead, it draws on publicly available materials to illustrate how the proposed framework can be applied to observable patterns of defense-related information narratives in a frontline democracy. Accordingly, the follow-

ing analysis adopts cautious modal language to describe possible pathways rather than confirmed mechanisms.

In Taiwan, foreign information manipulation and cognitive operations have increasingly been recognized as national security concerns in both policy analysis and public discourse (Chang & Chen, 2026). This policy context is further reflected in Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense's 2026 report to the Legislative Yuan, which noted that the Chinese Communist Party's cognitive warfare and united-front activities targeting Taiwan have evolved from isolated infiltration to systematic deployment. The report also indicated that Taiwan's responses include monitoring and countermeasures by specialized units, cross-ministerial coordination, international strategic communication, and cooperation with like-minded partners to counter cognitive-warfare narratives (Central News Agency, 2026).

The Taiwan materials provide a concrete setting for interpreting the five-dimensional framework. Narratives concerning the extension of military service illustrate how high-involvement policy issues may be reframed as questions of defense trust. Narratives related to military treatment and living conditions illustrate how low-involvement, everyday content may shape institutional impressions through repeated exposure. Narratives about voluntary service and military career choices illustrate how military identity may be repositioned through social comparison and value judgments. Together, these three types of narratives illustrate how trust erosion may occur across different audience groups, cognitive pathways, and information trajectories, rather than through a single uniform mechanism.

4.2. Military service extension and possible defense-trust reframing

The extension of military service in Taiwan illustrates how FIMI may operate within high-involvement policy issues (Office of the President, Republic of China [Taiwan], 2022; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In an FIMI context, such narratives may function not merely as false or misleading information, but as attempts to reframe security policy into ques-

tions of risk perception, generational burden, and policy legitimacy (Slovic, 1987). Because military service policy involves national defense, manpower mobilization, young people's career planning, and governmental decision-making capacity, it may become an entry point for emotional mobilization and possible trust impairment (NSB, 2024).

At the audience level, such narratives are likely to be especially relevant to draft-age men preparing for service and their families, while also extending to younger groups and the general public with potential concern for defense issues. For draft-age men and their families, the extension of military service involves concrete life planning and personal risk, and therefore carries a high degree of involvement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For the general public, however, the issue may be transformed into a broader evaluation of governmental decision-making capacity, war risk, and the direction of national security. Military service policy is, therefore, not only a matter of institutional design, but may also be reframed as a symbolic issue concerning whether the government is fair, transparent, and trustworthy.

In terms of narrative positioning, relevant content may be constructed around frames such as "extending military service means forcing young people to bear the risks of war," "the government is sacrificing youth for external strategic interests," or "defense policy lacks fairness." Such narratives do not necessarily require comprehensive policy analysis. Instead, they may intensify anxiety, perceived unfairness, and distrust through emotional language, visual symbols, personalized stories, and repeated exposure. The potential influence of these narratives, therefore, lies not only in their possible effect on policy support but also in their capacity to reshape the trust relationship between audiences and defense institutions. When military service policy is repeatedly associated with impressions of sacrifice, opacity, or untrustworthiness, defense policy may be reinterpreted not only as a matter of security governance but also as a trust-related governance risk (NSB, 2024).

This interpretation builds on previous persuasion research by suggesting that high involvement does not necessarily protect audiences from FIMI. Although the Elaboration Likelihood Model sug-

gests that high-involvement audiences are more likely to process information through central routes, the Taiwan illustration suggests that high-involvement issues may also become emotionally and politically vulnerable when they directly affect personal risk, family planning, or perceptions of fairness. In this sense, high-involvement audiences may not simply evaluate policy information rationally; they may also interpret policy burdens through broader frames of institutional credibility and security legitimacy.

4.3. Military treatment, living conditions, and everyday institutional impressions

Compared with high-involvement policy issues such as military service extension, narratives concerning military treatment, food, management, and everyday living conditions can be understood as low-involvement but high-frequency information content (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Although such narratives do not appear to directly involve major policy debates, their everyday, visual, and easily shareable nature may generate cumulative effects on the public image of the armed forces and on institutional trust over time.

Such content may be presented through fragmented images, personal experience narratives, complaint-oriented language, satirical memes, or short video clips. Possible frames may include chaotic military management, poor treatment, formalistic training, an impersonal system, or a lack of organizational professionalism. Their potential persuasive relevance may derive less from rigorous evidence than from perceived immediacy, emotional resonance, and a sense of everyday authenticity. General audiences may not actively follow defense policy, but they may incidentally encounter such content on social media platforms, short-video applications, or messaging groups, thereby forming intuitive evaluations of the professionalism and governance capacity of the armed forces under conditions of low cognitive burden (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

In terms of information journey, such narratives may rely heavily on short videos, social sharing, forum discussions, and messaging-based forwarding mechanisms. They may spread through imitation, remixing, secondary creation, and

meme-based reproduction. After a single event is repeatedly edited, commented on, and retold across different platforms, its symbolic meaning may be amplified and may even exceed the event itself. Thus, the potential influence of low-involvement everyday narratives may lie less in one-time persuasion than in repeated encounters through which fragmented content gradually comes to be understood as a symbol of the overall condition of the institution (Ecker et al., 2022). When the armed forces are persistently represented as offering poor treatment, being poorly managed, or lacking professionalism, public perceptions of their legitimacy and credibility as a national security institution may be subtly affected.

This interpretation is consistent with previous research on repeated exposure and incidental news consumption, while extending that research conceptually by linking everyday information contact to possible institutional trust impairment. Existing studies have shown that repeated exposure may increase familiarity and perceived credibility, and that audiences may incidentally encounter political information through digital platforms. The present analysis suggests that, in a FIMI context, such repeated and incidental encounters may gradually produce institutional impressions even when audiences do not actively seek defense-related information. This interpretation is consistent with our argument that FIMI should be analyzed as a cumulative information journey rather than as a single communication event.

4.4. Voluntary service, military career choices, and role reframing

The third possible pathway concerns the reframing of narratives related to voluntary service and military career choices. Compared with narratives on military service extension, which center on policy burden, or narratives on military treatment, which focus on everyday lived experience, narratives concerning voluntary service and military career choices more directly involve the social evaluation of military roles, defense manpower recruitment, and the long-term institutional foundations of security organizations.

At the audience level, such narratives may be particularly relevant to potential recruits and their

families, while also extending to broader societal perceptions of military roles. For potential recruits, such content may influence career expectations, risk assessment, and identity formation. For family members, it may affect the degree of support for military career choices, since parental communication and recommendation intentions have been shown to shape youth enlistment decision-making (Wu & Fan, 2026). For the general public, it may contribute to altering the overall evaluation of military service as a form of public service and as a security profession.

In terms of narrative positioning, relevant content may reinterpret military service as a choice characterized by low rewards and high risks, limited prospects, insufficient social recognition, or being consumed by the system. Such narratives may also incorporate elements of gender, class, generation, or educational background, placing military roles within broader frameworks of social comparison and value hierarchy. Their potential effect may not be limited to questioning a particular recruitment policy, but may also contribute to reshaping society's imagination of military identity. Military identity is not merely an occupational label; it is shaped by military culture, social learning, institutional belonging, and the broader relationship between the armed forces and society (Ben-Ari, 2021; Heward et al., 2024). If military careers are persistently narrated as choices lacking dignity, future prospects, or manageable levels of risk, defense organizations may face not only recruitment difficulties, but also a weakening of their social legitimacy and institutional appeal.

This interpretation complements previous studies on military identity and civil-military relations by adding an information-manipulation perspective. Existing research suggests that military identity is shaped by institutional culture, social learning, and broader social recognition. The present analysis suggests that FIMI may become analytically relevant to this process by reframing the social meaning of military roles. In this way, trust impairment does not only concern whether audiences support a specific policy or believe a particular claim. It may also involve the gradual weakening of the symbolic appeal, social legitimacy, and institutional attractiveness of military service as a public role and security profession.

4.5. From defense narratives to AI-enabled trust impairment

The illustrative application to Taiwan suggests three possible pathways through which defense-related narratives may be interpreted within the proposed framework. First, narratives concerning military service extension may transform high-involvement policy issues into questions of defense trust, generational burden, and policy legitimacy. Second, narratives concerning military treatment and living conditions may shape cumulative evaluations of institutional competence through low-involvement, everyday, and repetitive exposure. Third, narratives concerning voluntary service and military career choices may affect longer-term societal evaluations of military identity, defense manpower, and institutional appeal through role reframing.

These pathways should be understood as analytical possibilities rather than empirically verified causal mechanisms. The purpose of identifying them is to demonstrate how the framework can organize different types of defense-related narratives according to audience segments, cognitive pathways, touchpoint configurations, and possible trust-impairment processes. In this sense, the discussion does not claim that a single actor has produced these effects, nor does it establish that institutional trust has in fact declined because of specific information operations. Instead, it illustrates how defense-related narratives may become analytically relevant to the study of FIMI when they are repeatedly linked to policy anxiety, everyday institutional impressions, and the social meaning of military roles.

This interpretation is also consistent with Taiwan's official security assessment, which has noted that China has used false and disputed information to influence different social groups in Taiwan, intensify domestic divisions, weaken public will to resist, affect allies' willingness to support Taiwan, and promote identification with China's position (NSB, 2026). However, our framework adds a further analytical layer. It does not treat these activities only as false information or hostile narratives. Instead, it helps explain how different narrative types may correspond to different audience segments, cognitive

pathways, touchpoint configurations, and possible trust-impairment pathways.

These three types of narratives illustrate that the influence of FIMI may not stem from the persuasive effect of a single message alone. Rather, it may gradually reshape audiences' perceptions of, and trust relationships with, defense institutions through different levels of involvement, frequencies of contact, and narrative frames. External information manipulation does not necessarily need to directly negate defense policy itself. Instead, it may weaken public trust in defense institutions, military organizations, and governmental security decision-making through policy anxiety, everyday complaints, and role reframing.

With the intervention of AI and platform mechanisms, this process may further acquire the characteristics of automated content generation, targeted message delivery, and real-time strategy optimization. Generative AI can reduce the costs of content production and narrative variation, while algorithmic recommendation systems may increase the exposure frequency and repeated contact opportunities of specific narratives (Goldstein et al., 2023; Pathak et al., 2023). Audience behaviors such as clicks, shares, comments, dwell time, and reposts can also be converted into analyzable feedback data. Through such data, strategically motivated actors or platform systems may evaluate the interaction effects of different message versions and adjust narrative frames, emotional intensity, media formats, and target audiences (Bakir, 2020; Sedova et al., 2021).

This interpretation is consistent with and extends previous studies on AI-enabled disinformation. Existing research has emphasized that generative AI, deepfakes, and automated accounts can increase the plausibility of false content and raise the costs for audiences to distinguish between true and false information (Goldstein et al., 2023; Helmus & Chandra, 2024). Recent policy analysis in Taiwan further highlights this broader challenge. Tzeng (2026) argues that AI-enabled fraud and AI-assisted cognitive influence operations increasingly share overlapping tools and operational ecosystems, including forged identities, synthetic audio and video, AI-

generated webpages, automated interaction records, and adaptive conversational content. This convergence complicates counter-FIMI governance because fact-checking capacity may lag behind the speed of AI-generated false content, AI-forged identities are difficult to trace, and the distinction between criminal fraud and strategic cognitive operations may not be immediately observable (Tzeng, 2026).

The contribution of the present framework is to conceptualize the significance of AI not only in terms of content generation, automation, or deception, but also in terms of feedback-driven optimization. AI may further contribute to the transformation of information manipulation into an adaptive influence process in which content production, audience targeting, platform exposure, and behavioral feedback are continuously adjusted. FIMI may, therefore, be conceptualized not as a fixed set of strategies but as a continuously evolving process characterized by precision, persistence, and adaptability. For frontline democracies, this transformation suggests that FIMI is not merely an information security issue, but also a problem of democratic resilience and institutional trust governance under conditions of geopolitical competition.

In comparison with previous studies, the discussion leads to three cautious interpretations. First, compared with content-oriented studies, the proposed framework suggests that the strategic effect of FIMI may lie not only in the falsity or emotionality of content, but also in its possible cumulative impact on institutional trust. Second, compared with diffusion-oriented studies, it highlights the need to analyze information spread together with audience involvement, touchpoint accumulation, and relational trust change. Third, compared with AI-disinformation studies that focus mainly on synthetic content or automation, it suggests that AI can also be understood as an optimization mechanism that reorganizes the broader influence process. These interpretations support our central conceptual argument that FIMI in the age of artificial intelligence may operate as an audience-centered, relationship-oriented, and feedback-driven mechanism of institutional trust impairment.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to develop an audience-centered relational framework for explaining how foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) may operate across audiences, platforms, and time as a possible mechanism of institutional trust impairment in the age of artificial intelligence. Rather than treating FIMI only as a problem of false content, platform diffusion, or short-term persuasion, the study examined how informational influence may accumulate through repeated audience contact and gradually reshape trust relationships between citizens and institutions.

This study makes three main conceptual contributions. First, it systematizes FIMI as a five-dimensional relational process composed of audience segmentation and targeting, narrative positioning, involvement and persuasion pathways, touchpoint configuration and information journey, and relationship degradation and trust impairment. Second, through a theory-guided illustrative application to Taiwan, it illustrates how defense-related narratives may be interpreted as possible pathways of institutional trust impairment: policy anxiety in debates on military service extension, cumulative institutional impressions in narratives on military treatment and living conditions, and role reframing in narratives on voluntary service and military career choices. This Taiwan application should be understood as an illustrative case application rather than as a systematic empirical test of causal effects. Third, the framework conceptualizes artificial intelligence as a horizontal optimization mechanism that may strengthen the precision, persistence, and adaptability of FIMI by enabling content variation, audience targeting, algorithmic exposure, and feedback-based adjustment.

These conceptual arguments suggest that the strategic effect of FIMI should be understood less as the immediate persuasion produced by a single message than as the possible cumulative weakening of institutional trust through audience-centered and platform-mediated interaction. The analytical focus of FIMI research should therefore move from isolated messages to relational processes, and from content correction to the governance of trust, resilience, and institutional credibility. In the age of artificial intelligence, this shift is particularly important because influence operations may become more adaptive, scalable, and difficult to identify through conventional fact-checking or post hoc clarification alone.

The framework also has implications for democratic governance. If FIMI operates through long-term trust impairment, countermeasures should not rely solely on content removal, fact-checking, or rebuttal of false claims. Democratic states also need to strengthen relationship governance, audience resilience, data governance, algorithmic transparency, platform accountability, and institutional communication capacity. Media literacy should likewise move beyond truth–falsity identification and include awareness of emotional cues, narrative framing, repeated exposure, group resonance, and recommendation mechanisms. Such measures may help maintain institutional trust while preserving freedom of expression, privacy protection, and democratic openness.

This study has several limitations. It is a conceptual and theory-building study that uses Taiwan as a theory-guided illustrative application; it does not conduct systematic empirical testing, statistical measurement, or causal identification of trust impairment. The Taiwan case is used to demonstrate the analytical utility of the proposed framework, not to prove that specific narratives have produced measurable changes in public trust. Future research could employ experiments, social media data analysis, network analysis, surveys, interviews, or audience studies to examine the causal relationships among the five dimensions proposed in this framework. Comparative studies could also examine whether similar trust-impairment mechanisms operate differently across political regimes, media systems, security contexts, and platform governance environments. In addition, future research could develop indicators for measuring institutional trust impairment by integrating political trust, organizational reputation, media trust, and security perception.

Overall, the study concludes that FIMI in the age of artificial intelligence can be fruitfully understood as an audience-centered, relationship-oriented, and feedback-driven mechanism through which institutional trust may be impaired over time. For democratic states, the central challenge is not only to correct false information, but also to maintain the social and institutional conditions under which citizens continue to regard public institutions as credible, legitimate, and trustworthy amid intensifying geopolitical competition.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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